

# Infantry In Action



## RIFLE COMPANY AT BREST, FRANCE

Early in August 1944, General George S. Patton's Third Army broke out of the Normandy beachhead at Avranches and struck to the east, the west, and the south. Advance was so rapid that the German defensive positions and plans were useless and the demoralized enemy resorted to concentrating his forces at key points in an effort to delay as long as possible. Some of these key points were the port cities of St. Malo, Brest, Lorient, and St. Nazaire. Of these, Brest was the most important.\*

Brest, a city with a peacetime population of approximately 85,000, is located astride the Penfield River on the southwest tip of the Brittany Peninsula (see Map 1). The city is divided into two sections by the river. East lies the old city, ringed with an ancient moated wall constructed in the 17th century by Louis XIV as protection against possible invasion by England. This wall contained many bunkers, pillboxes, and heavy gun emplacements. The old portion of the city is undermined by many tunnels and passageways, which were used by the Germans as hospitals, storerooms, and underground headquarters. West of the river, in the new city, is the suburb of Recouvance, which is as large as the old city. Because most of the naval installations are located in Recouvance, it is bordered by a long chain of coastal defenses extending to the tip of the peninsula. South lies the harbor in the mouth of the Landerneau River. It is protected and partially enclosed by the Crozon Peninsula, which is also heavily fortified for coastal defense.

Outside the wall which surrounds the old city lies the more modern part of Brest, with a large business district

extending to the east and ending in the suburb of St. Marc. Beyond St. Marc to the east is a series of ridges and hills which dominate the approaches to the city.

The VIII Corps, Third Army, under Major General Troy H. Middleton, made an attempt to reach and seize Brest before enough German forces could be assembled within its fortifications to man its defenses. However, because of stiff German resistance this proved to be impossible. When elements of the VIII Corps arrived in the vicinity of the city on 6 August 1944, they found it defended by a fanatical enemy prepared for a long and costly



Map 1.

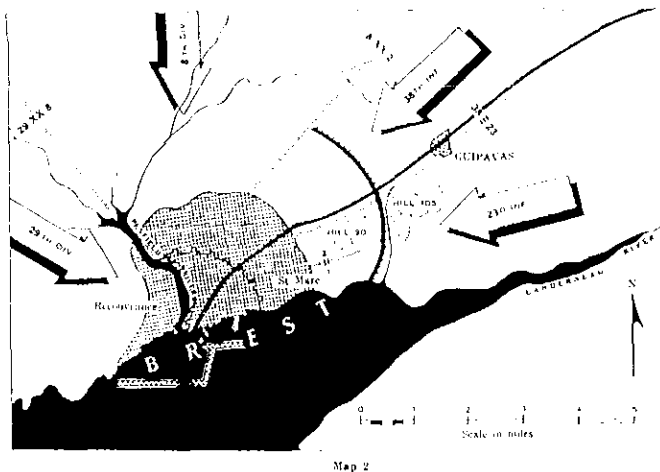
\*This is an edited version of an article that appeared in the *Infantry School Quarterly*, April 1948, pp. 114-136.

siege. (It was later learned that the commander of the Fortress of Brest had been ordered by Hitler to hold the city for at least 90 days in order to deny the Allies the use of this large port.)

The port of Brest had been developed by the French until it was their chief naval port, and when taken over by the Germans, it had been further developed into a mighty submarine base. Therefore, the immediate capture of Brest and its port facilities was considered highly desirable by the Allies for two reasons:

- A large port for the landing of troops and supplies was necessary for the continuance of the European campaign.
- The enemy submarine base was a definite threat to Allied shipping.

German forces within Brest consisted of the 2d Parachute Division, at approximately 35 percent of its normal strength, and the 266th and 343d Infantry Divisions. Reinforcing these divisions were naval and marine units. Artillery in support of the garrison was estimated as 11 battalions—mostly 88mm and 105mm—including the



artillery regiments of the three divisions. Also, heavy coastal guns were pointed inland to aid the defenders. The total strength of the German forces was estimated to be 50,000 men and these were under the command of Major General Herman V. von Ramecke, former commander of the 2d Parachute Division.

The U.S. VIII Corps, which was to attack Brest, consisted of the 2d, 8th, 29th, and 83d Infantry Divisions and the 6th Armored Division. Three of these divisions were disposed to form an arc around the city, with the 29th Division on the right (west), the 8th Division in the center (north), and the 2d Division on the left (east).

The corps plan of attack was for these three divisions to attack Brest simultaneously while two task forces were committed to clear the Crozon and Daoulas Peninsulas. The attack was to be preceded by a 20-minute artillery preparation. For the final phase of the attack the 2d Division was designated to mop up the city.

During the period 19 to 25 August, the 2d Division moved into position for the attack and began to feel out the enemy defenses. Task Force B was assigned the mis-

sion of clearing the Daoulas Peninsula so that the coast artillery guns could not be fired into the flank of the 2d Division as it moved in on Brest.

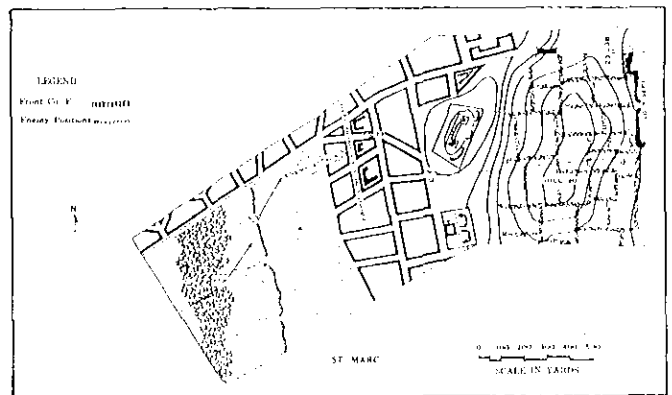
On 25 August an attack was launched upon the outer ring of fortifications. On 5 September, VIII Corps was detached from Third Army and assigned to the newly activated Ninth Army under Lieutenant General William H. Simpson, but the corps mission was unchanged. By 8 September the outer defenses had been cracked, and the 2d Division was in position to launch a drive into St. Marc and Brest.

### 2d Division Plan of Attack

The division plan of attack was to strike to the west with the 23d Infantry Regiment on the left, the 38th Infantry Regiment on the right, and the 9th Infantry Regiment in reserve (see Map 2). The assault regiments were to push through St. Marc up to the wall of the old city and then prepare for a final assault on that strongly held position.

The 23d Infantry Regiment planned to attack with two battalions abreast, the 1st Battalion on the left and the 2d Battalion on the right. The 3d Battalion was to be in reserve.

The plan for the 2d Battalion, 23d Infantry Regiment, was to attack with Company F on the right, Company G on the left, and Company E in reserve (see Map 3). One



platoon of heavy machineguns from Company H was attached to each of the two assault companies. The 81mm mortar platoon was in general support of the battalion. The battalion's initial objective was Hill 90 just outside of St. Marc. After securing this hill the attack was to continue into St. Marc upon order from the battalion commander.

### Situation of Company F, 23d Infantry

On 8 September 1944, Company F, 23d Infantry Regiment was occupying a defensive position on Hill 105, for which, six days before, it had fought a bitter two-day battle. At about 1800, orders were issued effecting relief of the 2d Battalion by the 3d Battalion, 23d Infantry. The

2d Battalion was ordered to move to an assembly area in rear of the eastern slope of Hill 105 and, during hours of darkness, to relieve the 2d Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment, which was located on the low ground between Hill 105 and Hill 90.

By the time the relief between the 2d and 3d Battalions, 23d Infantry, was accomplished and the move to the assembly area completed, darkness had set in and it was impossible to make a complete reconnaissance of the area in which the night relief of the 2d Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment was to take place. The relief was to be company for company; thus, Company F, 23d Infantry was to relieve Company F, 38th Infantry.

While Company F was moving forward under the command of the company executive officer, the company commander went forward and contacted the commander of Company F, 38th Infantry. He made arrangements for guides from each platoon in position to lead the platoons of the relieving company into position and to orient them on the situation before withdrawing from the area.

Company F, 23d Infantry moved into the area occupied by Company F, 38th Infantry at 2115. A great deal of confusion existed because both companies were designated as Company F. Control and communication were difficult in the darkness. The officers and noncommissioned officers of Company F, 23d Infantry, who did not have time to reconnoiter the area in daylight, were wholly dependent on the guides furnished by the unit they were relieving. To make matters more difficult, many of the noncommissioned officers of the unit being relieved had little or no knowledge of the enemy situation or the terrain to the front. The relief was finally completed at 2300.

The strength of the company at this time was about 170 enlisted men and seven officers. Approximately 30 percent of the company were veterans who had landed at Omaha Beach on D plus 1. The other 70 percent were seasoned replacements who had seen considerable combat in Normandy and Northern France.

Of the seven officers, the company commander was the only one who had landed with the company at Omaha Beach on D plus 1. The rest were replacements but they were combat seasoned, courageous, and capable. Morale, discipline, and esprit de corps were excellent. The company had been very successful in all its previous combat operations and the men had developed a deep sense of pride in and loyalty to the unit.

Orders to attack at 0630 the following morning were received soon after Company F, 23d Infantry, occupied its new position. Since the scheduled hour was before dawn and since the men had no visual conception of the terrain to the front, it was difficult to plan the attack. Another disadvantage was the fact that, although the company was to engage in a major attack, the men were unable to get much rest, because it was so late when the relief was completed. However, preparations for the attack were completed in the early morning hours and Company F was ready to move out at 0630, 9 September.

The line of departure was a hedgerow which extended

across the front and perpendicular to the direction of the attack (see Map 3). The company formation was to be two platoons abreast, with the 3d Platoon on the right and the 2d Platoon on the left. The 1st Platoon, in support, was instructed to follow the 3d Platoon by bounds, keeping under cover as much as possible. One light machinegun squad from the weapons platoon was attached to each of the two assault platoons. The 60mm mortar section was to remain in position and support the company by firing on targets that appeared after the attack started. Because it had no positions from which to fire, the attached platoon of heavy machineguns from Company II was told to follow the support platoon. There was to be no artillery preparation on Hill 90 prior to the attack, because surprise was desired.

### The Attack

At 0630, 9 September, Company F crossed the line of departure. The men moved out slowly, and then cautiously worked their way through German barbed wire entanglements which had been blasted by artillery on previous days. As the advance continued and no opposition was encountered, they moved forward more quickly, encouraged by the prospect of taking Hill 90 without a battle. As the leading elements neared the crest, a few scattered shots were fired, but the troops continued to advance and soon reached the top of the hill. The assault platoons found that the Germans had withdrawn during the night leaving only a few men as a covering force. Some of this force surrendered and the remainder withdrew to the next line of defense.

Companies F and G arrived at the top of Hill 90 simultaneously and prepared to consolidate their positions behind the hedgerows running along the crest of the hill. The Germans had withdrawn across a deep draw with almost perpendicular sides and had occupied positions on the high ground in the eastern fringe of St. Marc. At this time the assault companies along the top of Hill 90 were subjected to a heavy volume of machinegun and rifle fire. German artillery also opened up on the newly won positions, but most of the rounds landed in front of or behind Company F.

At about 0900, Company F received orders to continue the attack and move into St. Marc. Elements of the 38th Infantry on the right of Company F were across the draw and almost into St. Marc. In fact, their left flank was about even with the enemy positions to the direct front of Company F. The commander of Company F moved the attached heavy machinegun platoon into position with the two front-line platoons and directed all available firepower on the German positions. At the same time, he sent the support platoon around the right slope of Hill 90 to cross the draw behind the left flank of the 38th Infantry and to attack the enemy positions from the flank. This maneuver was successful, and the 1st Platoon obtained a strong foothold on the left of the 38th Infantry, thus



eliminating some of the fire on the other platoons. The 3d Platoon was directed to shift to the right behind a hedge-row and infiltrate across the draw to join the 1st Platoon.

The main German position was in and around a large chateau that stood on a knoll. With the 3d Platoon as a base of fire, the 1st Platoon assaulted this chateau and captured or killed all of the defenders. Among the 24 prisoners taken were two German officers who were in charge of the defense of the portion of the line in Company F's sector.

With the taking of this position the outer ring of the enemy defense was pierced and the way into St. Marc was open.

Company G, 23d Infantry, was still on Hill 90 and was unable to move forward in its zone because of German fire from positions in a large cemetery across the draw. To support the advance of Company G, the 2d Platoon, Company F, moved to the left (south) and succeeded in getting behind the Germans. From this position the men concentrated their fire on the flank of the German position and inflicted heavy casualties. Company G, however, was still unable to cross the draw.

In order to make the most of the successes already attained, Company F continued the attack into St. Marc, guiding to the left of the street which was the boundary between the 23d and 38th Infantry Regiments. At this time Company F, 23d Infantry and Company I, 38th Infantry were the only two attacking units in St. Marc. The other companies had been held up by the defenders.

To exploit Company F's advances, the battalion commander ordered Company E, then in reserve, to follow Company F into St. Marc, extend on the left flank of Company F, and perform the mission originally assigned to Company G. Since Company G was unable to overcome the German resistance in the cemetery, it was ordered to bypass the cemetery and follow Company E.

Company F moved into St. Marc with two platoons abreast, the 3d Platoon on the right, the 1st Platoon on the left, and the 2d Platoon in rear of the 1st Platoon to protect the exposed left flank. Houses and other large buildings in the area made it difficult to maintain control and at the same time search out the defenders' positions and hiding places. The German units to the front seemed to be withdrawing, though, and Company F advanced

29 INFANTRY July-August 1988

steadily. Approximately 200 prisoners, mostly Italians, Poles, and Russians who were in the German Army, were captured during this advance.

By 1700, Company F had advanced 1,200 yards and was ordered to halt and prepare to defend for the night (see Map 3). These preparations consisted of placing platoons and squads in houses and buildings from which they could cover the streets running across the front and the streets and alleys leading into them. The heavy machineguns of the attached machinegun platoon were brought forward and placed in windows and doorways from which they could cover the streets to the front. The company command post was located in a cellar at the rear of the defended area.

Company E moved into position on the left of Company F just before dark, and the two companies coordinated their defense. Thus, Company F had protection on both flanks and a company frontage of about 400 yards. In conformity with the company SOP, additional communication equipment was brought forward and installed before dark. The equipment consisted of two SCR-300 radios, one small eight-drop switchboard (German), five German telephones similar to the EE-8, twelve sound-powered telephones, and six SCR-536 radios. This equipment, with the exception of the radios, was carried on the quarter-ton truck and trailer that also carried the extra ammunition and closely followed the company. The truck was under the control of the company supply sergeant.

The communication system was operated by the communications sergeant and eight men from company headquarters. When the company halted, wire communication was established with all platoons and from platoon headquarters to their squads and outposts. Any disturbance along the company front was immediately reported, through the platoons, to the company command post. When installed, the company switchboard and the platoon headquarters phones were constantly attended by personnel on duty. The lines were checked every half hour during the night, and if a line went out radio contact was established until repairs were made.

## HOT FOOD

In keeping with the policy of serving the men a hot meal as soon as possible after halting for the night, supper was brought forward from the regimental train bivouac area and was taken to the platoons by carrying parties. Hot coffee accompanied the food, and water was brought up to fill canteens. Extra ammunition was delivered to the platoon areas and distributed under the supervision of the platoon guides.

At about 2300 an outpost established by the 3d Platoon reported German activity to its front. A few minutes later a strong German element forced the outpost to withdraw to the platoon defense area. Fortunately, the company had been alerted by the outpost and was ready to meet the attack.

A heavy volume of rifle and machine-pistol fire accompanied by a shower of hand grenades came from buildings across the street. The 3d Platoon returned the fire and retaliated with fragmentation grenades. This exchange lasted for approximately 30 minutes, then ceased abruptly as the attackers withdrew.

The platoon leader reported that casualties within the platoon consisted of two men killed and three slightly wounded. Unfortunately, the men killed were the platoon sergeant and the platoon guide. The death of these two men was a great loss to the unit, as both were battle-wise veterans who had landed with the company on the Omaha beachhead as privates. Their positions were filled by the two senior squad leaders.

At about 0430 orders were received to continue the attack at 0900. Company E was to attack on the left and Company I, 38th Infantry, on the right. Since the 3d Platoon had been hit rather hard by the loss of its platoon sergeant and platoon guide, the company commander decided to pass the 2d Platoon through the 3d Platoon when the attack started. The 3d Platoon would follow closely in support to assist in mopping up behind the two assault platoons.

## SLOW PROGRESS

At 0900, 10 September, the company moved forward and succeeded in crossing the street and moving into the buildings without opposition. The company front at this time extended across two rather small blocks of buildings, all joined together and solidly built.

Progress was slow due to difficulty in finding doorways or passages from one building to another. The streets running in the direction of advance were swept by enemy machinegun fire and covered by snipers. The only way to cross the street was to throw a smoke grenade and then dash through the cloud of smoke to a covered position on the other side.

After advancing about 200 yards, the company moved through the building area and faced a large, open expanse of lawn and shade trees. This park was approximately 800 yards wide and extended completely across the front of Company F and part of Company E on the left.

It was evident that the Germans had set up a strongpoint on the far side of the park. A large structure which appeared to be a concrete pillbox with a system of trenches extending on either side could be seen with binoculars. To feel out the position, a volley was fired, and the enemy returned fire from the pillbox and other points all along the trench system. The park appeared to be a strong defensive position, and there was absolutely no cover or concealment for attacking troops. After looking over the situation, the company commander requested artillery on the position.

Artillery fire was placed on the German defenders but it seemed to have little effect. A section of tank destroyers with three-inch guns was attached to the company and ordered to move into position in the rear of the assault

platoons. The officer in charge came forward, and the pillbox and other likely targets were pointed out to him. The tank destroyers then moved into firing position and placed direct fire on the German position. The company moved forward under cover of the fire of the tank destroyers and a platoon of heavy machineguns which had been placed on the second floors of the buildings that had just been cleared.

Under cover of the supporting fires, the two assault platoons succeeded in reaching the pillbox and the trenches. They quickly mopped up the defending troops in the area, killing many and taking a few prisoners.

The 1st Platoon then came under fire from another concrete emplacement about 200 yards to the front. The platoon sergeant contacted one of the tank destroyers and directed its movement into position to fire on this new threat. The German position was completely destroyed by the powerful gun of the tank destroyer.

Again the company moved forward through a small wooded area and up a gradual slope to a highway that branched to the south from the main street and formed the boundary on the right. In this advance, assault fire was used, and all rifles, submachineguns, and automatic rifles spouted a stream of lead into possible German positions to the front. As a result of this protective fire, very little resistance was encountered as the leading elements advanced into the area of large buildings.

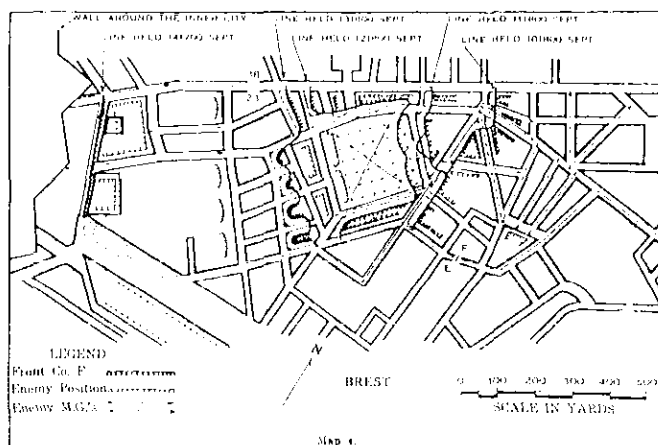
The company crossed the road and moved into the buildings, and the advance was halted temporarily for reorganization. Because the SCR-536 radios did not function properly inside buildings, it was necessary to lay wire forward to the assault platoons to provide a dependable method of inter-company communication.

As the company resumed the advance, German snipers in the higher buildings to the front and in basements with windows facing open areas and road junctions, became very active. The Germans were attempting to hold some buildings in the center of the block, and the fighting was almost hand-to-hand within the contested buildings. In this kind of fighting, submachineguns and fragmentation grenades were very effective.

By 1800 the company had cleared several blocks of buildings and was facing a large walled cemetery that occupied more than a city block. The cemetery had wide streets around its walled area and was flanked by long rows of high buildings on all sides. The assault platoons encountered fierce resistance from positions within the cemetery and along the streets, and from the upper floors of the surrounding buildings (see Map 4).

After a total gain of about one mile during the day's fighting, Company F was forced to go into a defensive position for the night. Casualties within the company had been light, but heavy losses had been inflicted upon the defenders. About 40 prisoners had been taken, including naval, paratroop, and air force personnel.

At about 2000, German coast artillery guns shelled the company position with large caliber shells, judged to be about 280mm. Several houses were completely destroyed, and hits on buildings containing men from the 2d Platoon



caused several casualties. This was reported to battalion headquarters and supporting artillery soon replied with counterbattery fire that silenced the German guns.

Orders were received at 0700 on 11 September to continue the attack at 0900.

Prior to the attack, the 81mm mortar platoon and the company 60mm mortar section fired concentrations in and around the cemetery, but due to the heavy wall and the well-protected positions occupied by the defenders, the fire was not very effective. At 0900 the company attacked. The 2d Platoon's objective was the right half of the cemetery and a row of buildings further to the right. The 1st Platoon's objective was the left portion of the cemetery and the row of buildings on the left. The 3d Platoon, in support, was to assist in mopping up. The machineguns were to support the attack from positions on the upper floors of buildings. However, their sectors of fire were limited by the heavy wall around the cemetery.

Both assault platoons were initially successful in gaining footholds in the buildings on both flanks, and a squad from each platoon moved into the edge of the cemetery through gaps that had been blown in the wall during the night by the heavy shells from the German coastal artillery guns.

Here the advance was stopped by heavy fire from German positions in the far edge of the cemetery. Some of the German weapons were emplaced in large stone burial vaults built above the ground, while others were dug in along the streets and at the corners. German machineguns commanded the street to the front and also crossed fire along the walks within the cemetery. These walks traversed the cemetery at all angles and thus provided the defenders with excellent fire lanes. Ricochets from the tombstones and flying splinters from the granite slabs, which entirely covered the surface of the cemetery, caused several casualties and forced the two squads within the cemetery to withdraw to the protection of the wall at the outer edge.

The advance through the row of buildings on either side was halted by a lack of doorways or passages between the buildings, and the streets were impassable because of German machinegun fire. Heavy firing by both sides con-

tinued throughout the day but no further advance was made. At 1800 Company F was occupying small sections in the buildings on the right and left flanks and had two squads just within the cemetery wall.

Company E on the left and Company L, 38th Infantry, on the right had also been held to short gains during the day. All assault companies were generally on a line.

The plan for the attack on 12 September was for the 1st and 2d Platoons to capture the buildings to the right and left of the cemetery, while the 3d Platoon maintained steady fire on the German troops in the cemetery.

A plan to move through the interior of the buildings by blasting holes in the partitions was agreed upon, and four demolition men from the Ammunition and Pioneer Platoon of Battalion Headquarters Company were attached to Company F. A large supply of TNT was moved into the company area during the night, and preparations for putting the plan into effect were completed.

The attack was resumed at 0900 the next day, 12 September, and fierce resistance was again met all along the front. The plan of blasting holes in the interior walls of the buildings on the right and left met with remarkable success. As quickly as the holes were blasted the men poured through into the next section, often taking the defenders by surprise, then advanced to the next barrier where the blasting operation was repeated. Although this method was comparatively slow, it resulted in fewer casualties than would have been incurred in a direct frontal attack.

By late evening the 1st and 2d Platoons had gained control of the buildings on both sides of the cemetery as far forward as the streets at the far edge of the cemetery. After seizing the buildings which commanded a view of the cemetery and the streets leading into it, the two platoons had a sniper's holiday picking off German soldiers whenever they exposed themselves. However, a small German force held out, and Company F spent the night of 12 September in the buildings surrounding the cemetery.

Except for the friendly artillery which fired relentlessly on the inner city, the night passed quietly. In the darkness it was difficult to get food and ammunition to the two forward platoons because the carrying parties had to thread their way through many doorways, passages, and holes. Carrying parties from company headquarters and the support platoon worked far into the night moving the necessary supplies forward.

The attack continued the next morning, 13 September, at 0900, with the 3d Platoon advancing through the cemetery against slight resistance, thus straightening the company front. The 1st and 2d Platoons started to advance abreast through the buildings in the next block. Progress was slow because it was still necessary to blast holes through the walls of the buildings—the streets to the front were still covered by German machinegun fire. Small isolated groups in strongpoints and snipers in the windows of tall buildings continued to resist.

In an attempt to support the advance of the 1st Platoon,

the 81mm mortar platoon fired several concentrations of high explosive ammunition on enemy positions. One of these concentrations fell short, and several rounds landed within a courtyard in the 1st Platoon area. The platoon leader and one of his squad leaders were slightly wounded, so an unassigned officer in the company was placed in command of the 1st Platoon.

Tank destroyers were used to fire on buildings at street intersections, to dislodge snipers, and to knock out machineguns, which were usually emplaced so they could maintain grazing fire for several blocks down the street and across intersections.

The advance continued slowly but steadily for two blocks, but then the assault platoons were halted by a series of burning buildings across the entire front. In a desperate effort to halt the advance, the Germans had set fire to the buildings in the path of advance. Since it was impossible to move through the blazing buildings, the troops were halted until the fires burned out. Fortunately, the area occupied by Company F did not catch fire or it would have been forced to withdraw. The fires burned all afternoon and most of the night; meanwhile, the company rested and prepared to continue the attack when it could.

At 0845 on 14 September, the company advanced through the burned area, which was about one block in depth and extended the width of the company front. The buildings were still hot and smoldering, but some areas were passable. The walls which were still standing provided protection for the men as they advanced.

After crossing the burned area, the company moved into an area of buildings where groups of Germans still controlled the street intersection from well-emplaced positions. One of these positions was a large church with a high dome, and it afforded concealment for many riflemen. This building, about one block from the wall of the old city, was believed to be the last German stronghold outside the wall.

By 1000, Company F was halfway through this block, but progress was slow and much demolition was necessary. In the 1st Platoon sector it was necessary to blast through seven walls to destroy the last enemy position.

By 1300 all the area in front of the wall, with the exception of the church on the right, was held by Company F. An assault on the church by the 2d Platoon was successful, and by 1700 the church was cleared of enemy and Company F was facing the wall of the inner city.

Just before dark the 3d Battalion, 23d Infantry relieved the 2d Battalion, with Company K relieving Company F. The relief was completed by 2130 and the men of Company F marched back through the streets for which they had fought. Their part in the battle for Brest was ended, and they moved into an assembly area in St. Marc.

Four days later, on 18 September, the German defenders of Brest capitulated and all resistance ceased. The fortress city which was to be held for 90 days, fell in 21.